DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 469 FL 027 609

AUTHOR Heller-Murphy, Anne; Northcott, Joy

TITLE "Who Does She Think She Is?" Constraints on Autonomy in Language Teacher Education.

PUB DATE 2003-00-00

NOTE 11p.; In: Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics, 2003; see FL 027 607.

PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

JOURNAL CIT Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics; n12 p10-18 2003

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Context Effect; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Language Teachers; Preservice Teacher Education; *Professional Autonomy; Resistance (Psychology); Self Concept; Student Teachers; Teacher Collaboration; Teacher Educators; Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on two teacher educators' efforts to understand an increasingly complex set of issues related to the effect of their roles as educators on their relationship with their colleagues. They explored the various setting in which language education occurs and examined how these settings could impact the autonomy of all participants (teacher educators, teachers, and student teachers). Their central concern was with the autonomy of both the educator and the participant in this setting. The model that evolved from their research has four interconnecting elements, each of which has an impact on the others. These elements include the following: teacher education setting; autonomy of all concerned; educator self-image; and participant resistance and openness. The paper notes concerns within the areas of educator self-image and participant resistance, highlighting possible strategies for addressing some of the problems. It concludes with suggestions for future exploration (e.g., participant attitudes toward teacher education and development and participant reactions to educators in different settings). (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

"WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS?" CONSTRAINTS ON AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

Anne Heller-Murphy & Joy Northcott (IALS)

ED 474 469

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Brian Parkinson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

FL027609

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS?" CONSTRAINTS ON AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

Anne Heller-Murphy & Joy Northcott (IALS)

Abstract

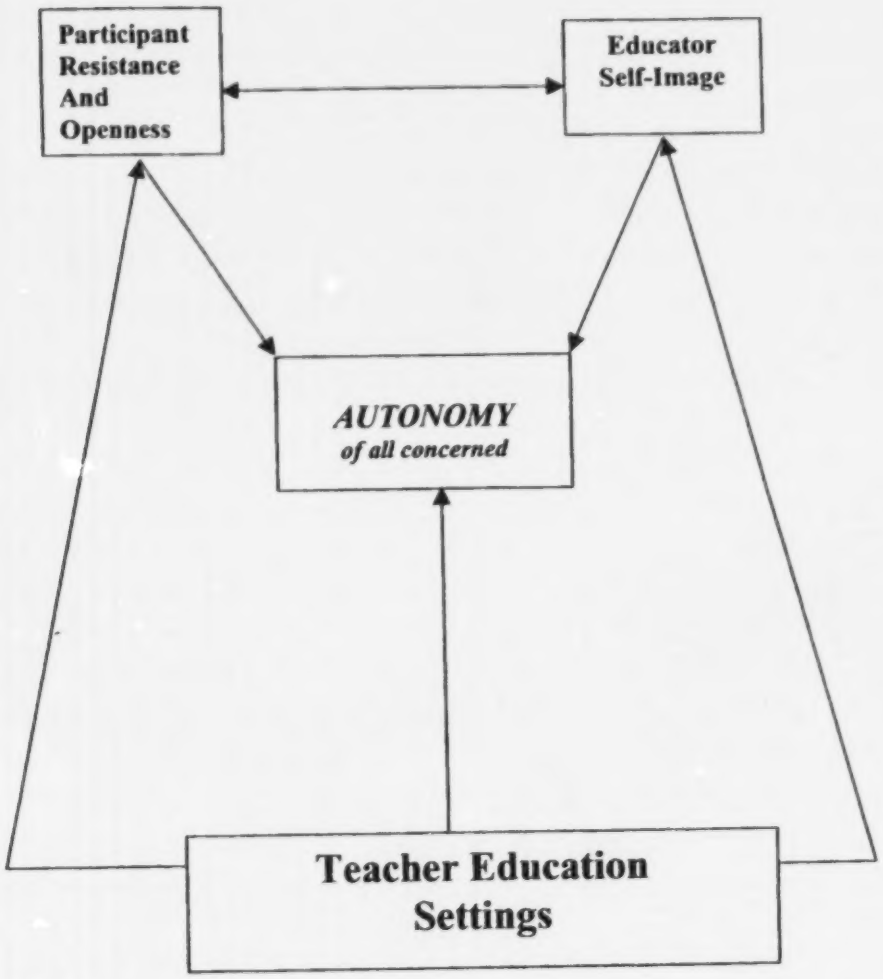
This paper reports work in progress. The various settings in which language teacher education takes place can affect the autonomy of all the participants in the process - teacher educators, teachers and trainee teachers. A model was devised which we hope will help teacher educators understand the various possible effects. First, the context from which the model arose is described. Focusing on this context, we then discuss questions raised by the model in relation to issues raised in the literatures of both teacher education and autonomy. Finally, we outline the conclusions reached so far, and suggest areas which we feel would justify further exploration.

1. The Context

Although working together on this paper, the writers' roles at the Institute for Applied Language Studies are different: as acting head of the Teacher Education Section, Joy Northcott is engaged for much of her working life in teacher education; as Development Co-ordinator for Self Access, Anne Heller-Murphy's involvement with teacher education is more sporadic. However, one major point of overlap is in our responsibility towards our colleagues: on the one side in providing expertise and advice on the design and running of Teacher Education courses; on the other in providing advice and practical support in the use of the Self Access Centre as a teaching/learning resource. The effect of our roles as 'educators' on our relationship with our colleagues is something that interests (and concerns) us, and in trying to understand it we found ourselves exploring an increasingly dense mass of issues, all related to a central concern with the autonomy of both the 'educator' and the 'participants' in this setting. The model (below) is what evolved as a result of our attempt to make sense of this 'mass'. It is hoped that the model will have potential as a heuristic tool for those hoping to integrate an understanding of autonomy into the design and teaching of sessions and courses for teachers.

FL027609

Who does she think she is? A model of the effect of setting on the autonomy of participants to teacher education programmes.



- Colleague/peer development
- In-service courses (optional/mandatory)
- Pre-service courses (funded/not funded)
- Conference papers
- Consultancies
- Textbook writing
- Publishing a paper

2. The Model: an outline

The model's four interconnecting elements each have an impact on the others, and in this paper we attempt to explore the way in which these areas relate to each other

within our particular context. Our starting point is therefore the base of the model: setting. There is a wide variety of settings in which teacher education can take place, e.g. pre-service, in-service; direct teaching or published papers; conferences and consultancies etc, each generating a different set of issues relating to the participants' sense of autonomy. One key issue in most of these settings will be the matter of choice: to what extent have the participants been free to opt in or out of the education process? The particular setting we have chosen to discuss is in-service, in-house, voluntary teacher development sessions run by colleagues, since this is what first provoked our initial discussion and led to the design of the model.

Many people would agree that presenting to one's immediate colleagues is often viewed with some trepidation. One possible reason for such apprehension is the fact that the presenter might be perceived by their colleagues as having undergone a status change, and there may be some difficulty on the part of some of the participants in accepting this. Hence the title of the paper: Who does she think she is? In such a setting, the presenter may begin to question their own self-image as educator, as well as their role and function as teacher educator in relation to their colleagues. In turn, the educator's self-image and the way this is reflected in their actions and approach may have an impact upon the resistance/openness of the participants, as will their attitude towards teacher education in general.

This idea of resistance takes us to the central element of the model: autonomy. It is possible that one's colleagues may feel that their autonomy of thought or their autonomy of action, or indeed both, might in some way be compromised by the teacher education process, and any 'resistance' may be evidence of this. Such feelings are liable to arise if participants feel that attendance at the session is compulsory or at the very least that there is a 'moral obligation' to be there, or if their 'ownership' of the process has not been established. It is likely that only the most closely-knit, collaborative group of teachers will be able always to avoid the negativity that can arise in such contexts, and it is this we hope to minimise.

3. The model: a discussion

3.1 Autonomy

There would at times appear to be almost as many definitions of autonomy in education as there are people writing and talking about it. Our particular concern here is how ideas about autonomy are relevant to the concerns of language teacher educators, and in what ways the process of teacher education can have an effect on the autonomy of all the participants in that process, particularly where they are colleagues of the 'educator'.

One simple (or apparently simple) definition of autonomy is that it is a basic 'freedom from control by others' (McGrath 2000). It is useful to consider first what this freedom might in fact mean in the context we are considering. An employed person has duties to fulfil in return for their salary, and in the case of teachers this may well include attendance at Teacher Development (TD) sessions and the implementation of certain teaching practices if there is a 'house style'. Having accepted a job, a teacher is presumed to have accepted the terms under which it is offered. However, even if

these terms are not always explicitly stated by the employer, there are likely to be assumptions made about what a good teacher is which govern the selection of staff. If these same staff are offered the chance or required to attend TD sessions, we presume that the institution is hoping for or expecting some change to occur in the teachers' classroom practice, or in their understanding of aspects of pedagogy or language. This being the case, the process by which the focus of a TD session is chosen is significant. If the sessions are mandatory, the content pre-determined and the selection of presenter/educator made by management rather than teaching staff, then there is little in the process that acknowledges the right of the teachers to have a sense of their own autonomy in the sense of 'freedom from control by others'. The mandatory in-service sessions in state primary and secondary schools can be a case in point. One primary teacher, on being asked how they decided what to have in-service sessions on, gave a wry shrug of the shoulders. It is unlikely that the content of such sessions would be successfully absorbed by the participants. In our particular setting, the fact that the teaching staff propose topics for TD sessions gives them some measure of control over the process. The teacher asked to run the session for their colleagues has been part of the same process, and may even in fact have volunteered to run a session. Attendance is not mandatory, placing the responsibility for professional development firmly in the hands of the individual teachers. Thus teachers are to a certain extent autonomous not only in the sense of having 'freedom from control by others' but also in having 'control over [their] own professional development' (McGrath 2000).

Our interest is in the more subtle issue of how (and whether) the autonomy of all the participants is affected even in these apparently encouraging conditions. In our discussions it became evident that most of our concerns were in some way related to the concepts of Educator Self-image or Participant Resistance/Openness.

3.2 Educator Self-image

Trainers considering their self-image as a teacher educator may find themselves pondering some of the following issues: the role and function of a teacher educator, the rights and duties of a teacher educator, and their status.

Is it the teacher educator's role to teach, inform, facilitate discussion, raise awareness, inspire change, provoke reaction? The role will, of course, vary with both the setting and the educator: a pre-service course will require more teaching, while an in-service session may be aimed at inspiring change. It will also vary within a course or session: raising the awareness of pre-service primary teachers of factors affecting children's ability to concentrate before teaching them some techniques for maintaining concentration throughout a lesson; informing in-service EFL teachers of changes to exams which will affect course design and materials before discussing ways in which the changes can be used to enhance the quality of teaching/learning. Certainly the various roles will all have an impact upon participant resistance and autonomy. The pre-service trainees may feel uncomfortable if they are not getting the direct teaching they expect, and in-service teachers may resent being 'taught', especially by a colleague.

In addition to this, although the function of a teacher educator is simply different from that of a teacher, there is sometimes the misplaced feeling among teachers/participants

that the educator's function is in some way higher than that of a (mere) teacher. The educator is thus elevated to a higher status. This elevation would be considered inappropriate in the setting of peer teacher education. Teachers are often asked to run an in-service session because within a particular field they are perceived to have more experience or qualifications than their colleagues, or perhaps to have done more research or read more. This is unlikely to cause great difficulty if the teacher's self-image matches that of their colleagues. At IALS this is normally the case, but it has happened that a colleague reported feeling that, though an 'expert' in one field, it was not with the kinds of student taught by the teachers asking for an in-service session; he felt he'd been approached because he is unofficially designated 'the IALS expert' in his field. Finally, a teacher may simply be the only person available with time to share their expertise. In this last case, it is likely that the decisions about in-service training are being made under some duress, however mild, raising the question of participant autonomy. Whatever the reason, the participants may hold particular opinions on the matter being discussed, and trainers should at all times expect to have their own ideas challenged (Lubelska and Robbins 1992).

What is more, the educator's own self-image can constrain their own autonomy: if there is any sense of 'elevation' to a trainer role, however temporary, the teacher running a session for colleagues for the first time is likely to be cautious in selecting content and tasks in order to avoid intensifying this feeling. There will also be a need to justify having a trainer role by minimising any tension, so risk-avoidance is a probable strategy. The problem here, of course, is that the session may be so bland as to produce nothing more than general 'chat' with nothing concrete to justify the time and energy expended by all concerned.

In their concern about role, function and status it is important, however, that educators in whatever setting are clear about their rights and duties. In the context with which we are concerned, educators must remind themselves that all teachers have the right to take on this role in relation to their colleagues. They in fact have a duty to do so both from a 'colleaguely' and an institutional point of view.

3.3 Resistance/openness

Whatever the perceived role and status of the trainer, if the course participants feel challenged in their ideas, beliefs or practice, it is fully understandable, firstly that they may feel destabilised, and secondly, that resistance is a natural defence to this: 'The re-thinking of our ideas presents a challenge to, or may seem to seriously threaten, the personal investment that we have already made in the issue' (Byrnes 1992:4). In the context of our chosen setting, the difficulties with challenging, or even simply discussing, deeply embedded assumptions and practices are intensified by the fact that one's colleagues generally possess a vast range of qualifications and experience, and have had time to develop and test out their own theories about teaching and learning languages. Of course, the resistance should be applauded, for it is potentially a positive force: the thinking through and analysis of the new ideas which a reflective resistor engages in is far more useful than any blind adoption of the proposed practices and theories.

Ur (1992) points out the difference between espoused theory and theory in action, i.e. between the theories we are able to describe and talk about and our actual classroom

practice. If these differences are made conscious, there may be some tension, and probably also resistance. Underhill's work (1992) on high- and low-yield questions goes some way to enabling a teacher educator to manage this tension, as does Woodward 's (1999) on moving from discussion of classroom tactics to beliefs. In this analysis, perhaps resistance is a sign of realisation and noticing, as well as a positive expression of autonomy. Such exploration can be painful and cause some friction – trainers need to expect this, and be skilled at dealing with it in a way that does not compromise their own autonomy i.e. by restricting their choice of activity, or their willingness to challenge participants' assumptions.

Once a training/development session is over, the teacher who chooses not to act on the ideas discussed in it may feel that they are exercising their autonomy by rejecting the practical application of a theory. Such 'reflective resistance' to change (Bobb-Wolff, personal communication: IALS Symposium 2001) is surely a clear sign of a participant's autonomy. The teacher who is unable to act, for whatever reason, may feel that they are not autonomous because of this, although it could be said that they have at least 'autonomy of thought'. In both cases, the autonomy expressed is that of 'freedom from control by others'.

How is the educator in this setting affected by these dichotomies: autonomy of thought vs. autonomy of action; espoused theory vs. theory in use? Most teacher educators recognise that the outcome of any session is unpredictable. In the context of peer teacher education, however, the (lack of) effect of their efforts is observable. If a teacher educator cannot see any change in their colleagues' teaching or ideas, that apparent decision not to act on the ideas and theories discussed (or espoused) in a session may be felt by the educator as an unspoken criticism. However, in considering this issue it should be remembered that there is no neat one-to-one relationship between a particular theory and a teacher's classroom practices, or indeed between a practice and a range of theories; that an observer's understanding of what is going on in a classroom may differ significantly from that of the teacher, who can probably relate it all to a coherent and well-thought-out set of underlying principles (Breen et al. 2001). The educator may in fact have more influence than they think, and the changes may simply be unexpected and therefore unobservable or unrecognised.

As we have already noted (Lubelska & Robbins ibid.), it is nevertheless crucial that educators recognise the right of participants to question or be critical of what is discussed and to have the right to choose how far their own ideas and practices will be affected by the input. Sessions/courses can be structured to allow time for this, for example by using the *Adopt, Adapt or Reject* strategy (O'Sullivan 1999). It is also important that some emotional distance is maintained between the educator, their subject and the participants. (Byrnes 1992) Objectivity in this regard will allow the educator to let go, to accept the rights of the participants to have ultimate choice over how much if anything they take on board, and how, i.e. to have control over their professional development (McGrath ibid.). This objectivity also helps the teacher in the position of educator to their peers to step out of the centre of the process, to remove themselves from the spotlight, so that the issue of their self-image can perhaps be less tied to how they view their role and rights in this setting.

4. Conclusions

There is, of course, no single solution to the concerns raised within the two 'problem' nodes on the model (educator self-image and participant resistance). However, in discussion with the Symposium participants and in our own reading and discussion, it has been possible to draw up a list of strategies likely to address at least some of the problems. If these difficulties can be dealt with, we believe that the autonomy of all participants to the process can be maximised.

4.1 Educator self image

It is clear that anyone working as a teacher educator, and vulnerable to insecurity about their status, rights or abilities, must work to reduce that vulnerability. This can be done by focusing on one's personal development and on one's place in the community of teacher educators. In the range of different settings set out in the model, some of the following strategies will be helpful in achieving this. All are recognised as methods of both teacher and trainer development.

- Make use of facilitative (self-help) groups (Underhill:1992)
- Operate a critical friendship scheme (Farrell:2001)
- Network
- Undertake peer observation
- Read widely - maintain competence in your area of expertise and as an educator
- Be self-aware, but not overly self-critical (Byrnes:1992)
- Team teach when possible (see Threadgold: 2001 for interesting report)
- Be reflective: e.g. keep a personal journal of being a teacher educator (Durham: 2001)
- Aim to develop a personal 'coherent and articulated theory of teacher training' (Brown: 1990)

4.2 Participant resistance/openness

We feel that there are a range of strategies available to the educator trying to deal with difficulties in this area. Borrowing from Dickinson's model for preparing learners for independence, we have divided these strategies into two:

4.2.1 Methodological

- Consider operating a negotiated syllabus for training courses/sessions (Little: 1995; Nunan:1989)
- Use techniques which make use of participant issues (Woodward: 2001)
- Create a principled balance between low-yield and high-yield questions, the latter being more conducive to the development of self-awareness but also high risk (Underhill 1992:72)
- Don't present personal views as general truths (Byrnes: 1992)
- Exploit the trainees' potential as evaluators of their training (Borg: 1998)

- Consider asking participants to use the 3-point *Adapt, Adopt or Reject* strategy (O'Sullivan: 1999)
- Avoid dissatisfaction by ensuring that there is 'a tangible result from the mists of consciousness-raising' (Pye:1990)
- Use concrete methods for analysing the assumptions underlying your teaching practice (Woodward: 1999)

4.2.2 Psychological

- Engage with resistance/resistors (Byrnes:1992)
- Understand processes and effects of change (Luxon:1994)
- Take a philosophical and also long-term approach (Lubelska and Robbins:1999)
- Be objective (Byrnes:1992)

We would expect any steps taken to counteract difficulties experienced in these areas to have a positive effect on the perceived (sense of) autonomy of all the participants.

5. Some possible areas for further exploration

Although we have thought long and hard about these issues, we feel there is a lack of concrete data on how educators and participants react to their roles and relationships within education programmes and sessions. It is only by exploring these more methodically that we can reach a better understanding of how to design and administer teacher education. There are three areas in particular that we think could be investigated. First, participant attitudes to teacher education/development: this would reveal the degree to which matters such as control over content, method, timing and quantity etc. affected participant resistance-openness. Secondly, participant reactions to educators in different settings: for example, in what way are participant reactions to colleagues running in-service sessions different from their reactions to sessions run by visiting educators, and how might this affect their behaviour during and after the sessions. Finally, we feel it is important to try to explore the effect of audience on session design. This would, we hope, help educators to plan sessions to best suit their participants' needs and expectations.

References

Barfield A., T.Ashwell, M.Carroll, K.Collins, N.Cowie, M.Critchley, E.Head, M.Nix, A.Obermeier and M.C.Robertson. 2001. *Exploring and Defining Teacher Autonomy: a Collaborative Discussion*. WWW document. http://www.flang.tsukuba.ac.jp/barfield/teacherautonomyshiz.htm

Borg S. 1998. 'The good teacher trainer'. *The Teacher Trainer* 12/2: 7-10

Breen M.P., B.Hird, M.Milton, R.Oliver and A.Thwaite. 2001.'Making sense of language teaching: teachers' principles and classroom practice'. *Applied Linguistics* 22/4: 471-501

Brown R. 1990. 'The place of beliefs and of concept formation in a language teacher training theory'. *System* 18/18: 85-96

Byrnes F. 1992. 'Resistance to change in teacher training courses'. *The Teacher Trainer* 6/1: 4-6

Durham J. 2001. 'Becoming a teacher educator'. *The Teacher Trainer* 15/2: 4-7

Farrell T. 2001. 'Critical Friendship'. *ELTJ* 55/4: 368-374

Little D. 1995. 'Learning as dialogue: the dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy'. *System* 23/2: 175-181

Lubelska D. and L. Robbins. 1999. 'The move from teaching to training: what's involved?' IATEFL Conference, March 1999.

Luxon T. 1994. 'The psychological risks for teachers at a time of methodological change'. *The Teacher Trainer* 8/1: 6-9

McGrath I. 2000. Teacher Autonomy. In Sinclair et al., eds. 2000: 100-110

Nunan D. 1989. 'A client-centred approach to teacher development'. *ELTJ* 43/2: 111-118

O'Sullivan A. 1999. 'The AAR technique in teacher development'. *The Teacher Trainer* 13/3: 11-13

Pye B. 1990. 'Learner Independence: a weekend seminar for teachers in Bavaria'. *The Teacher Trainer* 4/2: 23-25

Sinclair B., I. McGrath and T. Lamb. 2000. *Learner Autonomy, Teacher Autonomy: Future Directions*. Harlow: Longman.

Threadgold K. 2001. Editor's letter. IATEFL Teacher Development SIG Newsletter. 3/01: 24

Underhill A. 1992. 'The role of groups in teacher self-awareness'. *ELTJ* 46/1: 71-80

Ur P. 1992. 'Teacher Learning'. *ELTJ* 46/1: 56-61

Woodward T. 1999. 'A way of getting from classroom tactics to talk of beliefs and values'. *The Teacher Trainer* 13/2: 8-10

Woodward T. 2001. 'Getting real: one way of working with participant issues on trainer training courses'. *The Teacher Trainer* 15/1: 11-12

11

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

[X] This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

[ ] This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").